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How an NBC TV Series Got Couch Potatoes to Rise up on the Net

BY GORDON FELLER

You could say it all started as the first season of "seaQuest DSV," one of NBC's most expensive prime time ventures, began to draw to a close in May of 1994. What first aired as a science-fact-based "big production" TV series, one showing early signs of potential success and intense viewer interest, became instead the target of viewer wrath and red-hot scorn.

The Internet surfers of the show's core audience began comparing detailed online notes early on about the progress of the seaQuest's story line and character development. After the show's first bad omen, the precipitous demise of the science-based premise, the "Rescue seaQuest Campaign" was electronically organized. When you visit their Usenet groups or their online forums on the Big Three services (AOL, Compuserve, Prodigy), or when you hit their Web site (http://www.best.com/~maryflr/P1-Intro.shtml), the identity and direction of the Campaigners becomes clear: all of their volunteer activity had one aim, to have a direct and lasting impact on the show's future direction. As research on seaQuest viewers has pointed out, they constituted an ideal demographic for a TV show to bring to its advertisers and sponsors — they were numerous and well educated. One might think the show's producers would be interested in keeping them watching.

In fact, Executive Producer, Patrick Hasburgh, and his deputy, Supervising Producer Lee Goldberg, did not exactly take a fancy to this controversial (and quite successful) netizen effort. While the Campaign attempted to redefine the relationship between "powerful" TV broadcasters and "passive" consumers of TV programs, "those puny little viewers" were receiving threatening emails from the producers who announced they would instruct "The Legal Department" to go after Campaign coordinators. When the Campaigners expressed, in broad public forums, their collective unhappiness with creative decisions — such as dropping seaQuest's Emmy-winning music composer and then its star, Roy Scheider, or when the show's adoption of a war-oriented premise — coordinators received even more of these hostile responses.

It was hard for the Campaign to be damaged. Though headquartered in Northern California, the Campaign's activity was widely dispersed, as the Internet is, among

angered participants in 13 countries, with local volunteer coordinators employing aggressive campaign tactics. The Campaign created a network of several thousand very vocal and well-organized viewers who were ready, willing, and able to "talk back" to NBC and Steven Spielberg's hugely successful production company. Public admissions by top NBC brass that the Campaign was having a large impact served to reinforce the David vs. Goliath feel of the whole affair.

There is an emerging democratic potential for the new interactive (non-broadcast) tools. The Rescue seaQuest Viewer Campaign used these tools quite effectively, especially via the World Wide Web, to empower Campaign participants and to transmit information and encouragement. Considering the broader social phenomenon of which this Campaign is a part poses some really interesting questions. Especially pressing is one: How is interactive multimedia technology, now available to average TV viewers, enabling more effective communication with the old monolith of one-way broadcast media? The founders and managers led the Campaign through a series of well-defined stages, using tactics and strategies outlined on their rather sophisticated home page.

In the end, the producers chose not to listen to the Campaign's concerns, nor its constructive input. The viewers, unsophisticated as they were about TV production, knew the series wouldn't survive without greater attention to better writing. While the producers were busy belittling the Campaign, they could have been listening. While sending private email messages laced with anger and obscenities, the producers could have engaged in a dialogue with the Campaigners. While attempting to discredit individual Campaign coordinators, the television producers could have been adjusting their focus so that perhaps the show could survive and prosper at the levels it had enjoyed during the first season.

The result of their decisions? The show failed and was canceled.

The Internet is great place for smarter broadcast media producers to hear audience feedback — and to get it fast. If Hollywood producers like the folks running Dreamworks don't learn to listen, they can expect similar trouble for other high-concept series.

Statistics have said it all: TV viewership is on a downward spiral. It will continue in that direction if communication from broadcasters remains unidirectional.